

Senior Italian politician in race row after likening country's first minister to an orangutan

- Roberto Calderoli made remark about immigration minister Cecile Kyenge
- Calderoli said Dr Kyenge should be a minister 'in her own country'
- He told a party rally Congolese-born Kyenge 'looked like an orangutan'
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PUBLISHED: 00:28 GMT, 15 July 2013 | **UPDATED:** 10:08 GMT, 15 July 2013



Remarks: Roberto Calderoli said Congolese-born minister resembled an orangutan

A senior Italian politician is facing calls to resign after likening the country's first black Cabinet minister to an orangutan.

Roberto Calderoli, vice-president of the Senate – Italy's upper house – and a leader of the anti-immigrant Northern League party, made the remarks about immigration minister Cecile Kyenge at a party rally.

'When I see images of Kyenge I cannot help think, even if I don't say that she is one, of a resemblance to an orangutan,' he said.

For most of the day, Calderoli said he had no intention of resigning and offered only a qualified apology.

'I did not mean to offend and if minister Kyenge was offended I am sorry, but my comment was made within a much broader political speech that criticised the minister and her policies,' he said.

But after hours of nearly universal condemnation and extensive coverage by the international media, Calderoli called Kyenge in the evening to apologise directly. She had done well to become a minister, he said, but 'perhaps she should do it in her own country'.

Miss Kyenge, 48, is a Congolese-born doctor who has lived in Italy since 1983 and became a minister in April. She declined to comment on Mr Calderoli's remarks. Prime Minister Enrico Letta has denounced the comments as 'unacceptable' and 'beyond every limit'. And several ministers said Mr Calderoli should step down from his Senate position.

Politicians, including some from his own party, lambasted Calderoli, with some calling for him to resign as Senate vice president. In an official statement and on Twitter, Prime Minister Enrico Letta said the comments were unacceptable.

'They go beyond all limits. Full solidarity and support to Cecile. Forward with your and our work,' Letta said.

'I just spoke with minister Kyenge and I apologised,' Calderoli told state news agency Ansa.



Racist slur: Calderoli also said immigration minister Cecile Kyenge, pictured, should 'be a minister in her own country, and was later forced to apologise

Kyenge is campaigning to make it easier for immigrants to gain citizenship, and she backs a law that would automatically make anyone born on Italian soil a citizen.

Last month, a Northern League member in the European parliament was expelled from the eurosceptic Europe of Freedom and Democracy group for making racist remarks about her.

Mario Borghezio had attacked Kyenge for wanting to impose 'tribal traditions' in Italy as a member of a 'bonga bonga' government, an apparent play on the so-called 'bunga bunga' parties of former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Opposition politician Calderoli, twice a cabinet minister under Berlusconi, has often caused offence.

In 2006, he was forced to resign as reform minister after displaying a T-shirt mocking the Prophet Mohammad during a state news broadcast. The same year, after Italy won the soccer World Cup, he disparaged the opposing French team, which he said had lost because its players were 'niggers, Muslims and communists'.

Before Calderoli's apology, Kyenge told AGI news agency he should think of his responsibility as a senior Senate member.

'I don't want to address Calderoli the person, but as a representative of an institution: reflect on what you want to represent through your language,' she said.